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ABSTRACT

In 2001, the Australian Centre for Youth Literature released "Young Australians Reading," a report on the reading attitudes of Australia's 10- to 18-year-olds prepared by Woolcott Research, that suggests there is a large body of young people who are waiting for guidance, support, and inspiration if they are to become lifelong readers. This publication asserts that in Australia adults at all levels are failing to provide that critical link for young people. It comments on the findings of the reading attitudes report, noting that the findings show clearly that the majority of young people want to read, want more time to read, and understand the value of reading. The document also suggests some questions for teaching staffs to discuss the findings in "Young Australians Reading" and lists some strategies for action, such as making "school reading" interesting, fostering a culture of home reading, and most importantly, changing the ways in which books are selected and represented. (NKA)

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PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION PETA

Young Australians: **Reading** or Not?

AGNES NIEUWENHUIZEN & SARAH MAYOR COX

Last year, the Australian Centre for Youth Literature released Young Australians Reading *— a report into the reading attitudes of Australia's 10–18 year olds. The report does more than establish the popularity of* Dolly *and* Harry Potter. *It suggests that there is a large body of young people who are waiting for guidance, support and inspiration if they are to become lifelong readers.*

Reading: Does it matter?

AGNES NIEUWENHUIZEN

One of PETA's most valuable publications remains *The Reading Environment* by the British author and critic Aidan Chambers (1991). Chambers is a strong advocate of the 'adult mediator' or 'enabling adult' — that critical link in the process of matching books and readers.

I believe strongly that in Australia, with obvious notable exceptions, adults at all levels are failing to provide that critical link. That is, they are failing to:

- make the link between reading and literacy
- validate reading as a source of cultural exchange, interpersonal connection and personal enrichment within curricula, or on the agendas and programs of relevant organisations and conferences
- promote reading and present appropriate books in acceptable ways to the young people in their charge
- make and ensure time to read
- become informed and enthusiastic about reading — in general, failing to create a reading culture.

They are failing, in fact, to do precisely what Chambers and other key figures (see the panel quotations — where are the Australian equivalents of these people?) have advocated if we want an articulate and literate community. This is a structural, cultural, economic and social problem with enormous ramifications for a society that pays lip service to being concerned about literacy, particularly in regard to boys. It also has considerable ramifications for the publishing industry, despite the fact that our books for children and young people are world-renowned and highly praised. It is a dismal truth that many Australian authors are better known, valued and celebrated overseas than at home.

I can hear the cries of 'Not us! Not me!'. This is a difficult discussion to have, because the topic is only ever raised in forums like this one.

Why reading matters ...

I am convinced that a society without literature, or a society in which literature has been relegated — like some hidden vice — to the margins of social and personal life, and transformed into something like a sectarian cult, is a society condemned to become spiritually barbaric, and even to jeopardise its freedom.

In our time, science and technology cannot play an integrating role, precisely because of the infinite richness of knowledge and the speed of evolution, which have led to specialisation and its obscurities. But literature has been, and will continue to be, as long as it exists, one of the common denominators of human experience through which human beings can recognise themselves and converse with each other, no matter how different their professions, their life plans, their geographical and cultural locations, their personal circumstances.

Source: Mario Vargas Llosa (2001) 'Why Literature?'. *The New Republic*, May.

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If a person turns from print — finding it too slow, too hard, irrelevant to the excitements of the present — then what happens to that person's sense of culture and continuity?

Source: Sven Birkerts (1994) *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Faber, New York.

Some quotes from young Australians

It's a scary thing to sit on a train and see ten people deep in books while I am reading 'TV Week'. I feel dumb, but I know I am not. When I started reading 'Cross My Heart', I thought: 'Now I am part of the reading club and I feel good about it. I am part of the real world.'

– An 18-year-old who had completed Year 12 and had just admitted that Maureen McCarthy's *Cross My Heart* was the first book she had ever finished.

Source: Nieuwenhuizen, A (ed.) (1994) *The Written World: Youth and Literature*. D W Thorpe, Melbourne.

Give me books that thrill me! I want to be entertained. Let me feel the characters' emotions. Take me to places I have never been to — other worlds, other dimensions. Show me different technologies. Scare me. Or at least make me feel part of the book.

– Ryan, Year 11. Source: Nieuwenhuizen, A (ed.) *Ibid.*

It was fun to be amongst people who think like me about books, reading and writing ... And I've never seen boys excited about books and meeting authors before.

– A Year 6 girl after a session with authors of fantasy as part of the Australian Centre for Youth Literature's biennial 'Reading Matters' conference.

Here is one illuminating set of statistics from *Young Australians Reading*.

Who do young people listen to for advice about what to read?	
Friends	35%
Teacher librarian	16%
Mother	13%
English teacher	9%
Local librarian	8%
Father	5%

While you ponder that, I'll let Sarah explain why much else that is in the report is worthy of our attention in this *PEN*.

Not another (yawn) literacy report ...

SARAH MAYOR COX

A number of important reports on literacy have been published recently. Among them is *Young Australians Reading*, which is the focus of this *PEN*.

Presumably, the bodies that commission literacy reports actually want the target audience to read, be informed by, respond to — and even act on — the findings. But it must be said that there is often a large gap between the intention of published reports and the application of report findings. This gap is not unlike the discrepancy that can come about between a teacher teaching something and a student actually learning something. One does not necessarily follow on from the other!

Some questions for you as a reader

What is your response when you hear that a new report on the state of literacy has been published? Do you:

(1) shrug and think to yourself: 'More indigestible paperwork written in academic jargon — who's got the time?'

(2) become angry that more money has been spent commissioning yet another report that you won't have time to read, instead of spending more money employing teachers to reduce class sizes, or increasing the number of specialists, or increasing your administration support and professional-development budget, or even buying resources for your school?

(3) rush to get a copy, pore over it, take note of the findings, plan how to trial some of the recommendations, tell your colleagues about it and list it for discussion at your next staff or unit meeting?

I ask these questions knowing how few of you will be able to answer (3), even if you want to. And I want to challenge those of you who are at times (like me) card-carrying members of the (1) or (2) clubs to change the way you look at and interact with these reports. Gold can be found buried under some of the research jargon.

If we are feeling rushed as teachers because we have to cram as much as possible into our school week, how are our students feeling? Do they have time to start and finish the books they hear about, and want to read? Who has time to tell them about the new (and old) texts that are out there waiting to be read? Do they have the chance to gossip informally, and in a more structured way, about what they have been reading? Or is their time at school so rigidly accounted for — and their afternoons, evenings and weekends so choc-a-

block with extra-curricular activities — that they are too exhausted, over-stimulated or distracted to fit leisure reading into their busy diaries?

The *YAR* report

So to *Young Australians Reading*. I was excited when Agnes approached me to co-author this PEN: having read the report, I was keen to help bring it to the attention of classroom teachers and teacher librarians, because it has genuinely important implications for literacy. And as much as I am a words person rather than a statistics person, I found it refreshingly interesting and easy to read. I wondered how many people knew of its existence and, moreover, how many other interesting and relevant reports are out there for us to read, discuss and act on.

One of the aims of this PEN is to draw your attention to some of the key findings. I'll let Agnes do that now. Then I'll try to give you the chance to use the findings as a springboard to further discussion at a staff or unit meeting.

Unpacking *Young Australians Reading*

AGNES NIEUWENHUIZEN

What we wanted to know

As part of its role as a leader in the field and in order to understand the place of reading in the lives of young people, the Australian Centre for Youth Literature (ACYL) commissioned national research into the reading habits, experiences and preferences of Australian 10–18 year olds. We wanted to answer some questions, and to test (and perhaps challenge) some attitudes, perceptions and practices. The focus was on reading for pleasure.

Do keen readers in primary school become increasingly reluctant readers as they progress through secondary school? Do current education policies and practices support the development and maintenance of a reading culture and environment? How important are family attitudes and practices, peers and role models? Are the mainstream media correct when they assume that most teenagers don't want to read? Does the emphasis on new technologies, sports and entertainment contribute to perceptions, especially amongst young males, that it is 'uncool' to be a reader?

What we found out

The research findings are overwhelmingly and, perhaps to some, surprisingly positive. They show clearly that **the majority of young people want to read, want more time to read and understand the value of reading**. Those surveyed claim that they read for pleasure no less frequently than they play computer games or use the Internet. Former McPhee Gribble publisher Hilary McPhee sees the report as "very good news. It tells us clearly what we suspected all along — that reading for pleasure is what young people want to do. That reading is not on the wane. That reading as a chore is not real reading."

A key message is that peer pressure and peer recommendations are increasingly significant as young people progress through school, and that young people are seeking — but not finding — appropriate recommendations.

Attitudinal segments

Of the 10–18 year olds surveyed:

- 31% are 'avid, confident readers' — keen, interested, only need to be encouraged to maintain current enthusiasm and reading patterns
- 24% are 'book-positive rebels' — they want to read but don't want to be told what to read all the time, and generally don't like the books they are made to read at school
- 24% are 'book-neutral light readers' — less enthusiastic or aware of benefits, but still more positive than negative
- 21% are 'reading irrelevant' — often see themselves as slower readers, and reading does not form part of their social interaction.

From these figures, it is evident that a significant number of readers are simply waiting to be connected with the right book. That means that teachers, among others, can start to effect change immediately by working with the large number of students in this category — and then using them creatively to enthuse others.

It is very clear that a significant shift occurs in attitudes towards, and enjoyment of, reading in the middle years of schooling. This has to do with the way books are presented, with the distractions of young people's expanding social and educational lives, and with the increasing emphasis on reading for study

rather than for enlightenment, inspiration and pleasure. I am very pleased that publishers urged us to make the age range for the research 10–18 rather than 12–18, as I had originally intended. This has made the findings even more dramatic and, we hope, useful as a wake-up call to middle and secondary schools.

Learnings for the primary school

It is important that I make clear here my background in secondary-school teaching (some 25 years!). I will not claim extensive knowledge of primary-school practices, and much of the work of the ACYL is also aimed at secondary-aged young people. However, *Young Australians Reading* has significant implications for primary schooling. This is why Sarah and I decided on a partnership approach. So, while I will leave the direct primary implications to Sarah, I do want to include two stories that have come my way, and to ask: how typical might these scenarios be?

Mini story 1

One primary teacher I know with a special interest in promoting reading was appointed to a school as a 'literacy support teacher' for the upper-primary years. There were few books in the school, so she created a small library of her own books. She soon became known and in much demand as 'the miss with the books'. Despite this, and much lobbying during the two years that she was at this school, she could not bring about any change to the school culture. The expectation was that she test and 'fix' the group (almost one third) of students with identified literacy problems through classroom support or individual withdrawals. *She was unable, at any level, to persuade the staff that attitudes to books and reading were in any way connected to literacy problems.* The school did not have a librarian, and the library was opened once a week by a volunteer parent. The school seemed to maintain a purely functional approach to the so-called teaching of reading, and insisted that no funding was available for the purchase of books. There seemed no understanding of the value and role of story. This teacher felt the school would have been much better off replacing her with a keen and knowledgeable full-time librarian.

Mini story 2

I know another primary teacher who has chosen to work as a relief teacher until her children are at school. This means that she works in a wide range of school settings. Many of these do not have librarians. Hardly any have a concerted approach to the promotion of reading or to ensuring the availability of a range of picture books or other attractive non-graded reading material. Reading time and reading for pleasure do not rate highly, if at all, in the curriculum. It is not an issue that features in staff-room discussions or meetings. In other words, the staff don't see that their knowledge of children's books, their own reading habits or their attitudes to books and reading are in any way linked to their effectiveness as teachers.

Young Australians Reading makes these mini stories all the more perplexing. It shows that children and their families recognise the value and importance of reading. Why would educators fail to do so?

Some other key findings

- 74% of all 10-18 year olds claim to like reading to some extent.
- 84% of adults (from a related survey) consider it 'really important' for young people to read for pleasure.
- 76% of primary and 46% of secondary students read 'every few days'.
- 64% would like to read more (73% primary, 61% secondary).
- 56% of primary and 78% of secondary students consider required school reading to be 'boring'.
- There is an 80% correlation between significant numbers of books in the home and frequency of reading.
- 68% of secondary-school students said they did not have enough time to read.
- Fewer than 20% of the 10–18 year olds consider their school or public libraries to be inviting or able to meet their recreational needs.

These findings suggest that there is a huge amount of work to do, but there is also much fertile ground on which to do that work. Over the past 20 years we have somehow lost our way in ensuring that our practices are effective in creating willing, confident readers who will remain readers for life. All the evidence shows that this is particularly so for boys. The Centre's aim and, I assume, yours, is to engage young readers in an ever wider, more eclectic and more sophisticated range of reading — to hone their literary and critical skills while nurturing the sense that books and reading are, and must be, pleasurable. However, unless we change the ways in which we select and present books in the classroom (particularly in middle- and secondary-school contexts) and devise educational practices that make time and space for reading, even many of the keen ones may turn off. I hope that Sarah's reflections, following, will provide you with some impetus to ensure that that doesn't happen.

Responding to *Young Australians Reading*: Some questions for teaching staff

SARAH MAYOR COX

If you haven't had a chance to read and discuss *Young Australians Reading*, here are some questions and suggestions to get the ball rolling.

... libraries in primary schools do in fact play an important role as sources of advice about books, [while] in secondary schools the focus becomes much more on the library as a study resource. [p 9]

- Does the school librarian have regular time to enter the classroom with a selection of what's new in the library to share with the students?
- Does the school librarian have five minutes at the start or end of each staff meeting to do the same for staff?
- Is there a time and place for parents to be encouraged to borrow for their own pleasure?
- Which staff regularly gossip with students about new books? Who is responsible for ensuring that this happens at each unit level within the school?
- When, and for how long, are students encouraged to share informally about books (with no assessment or writing task attached)?
- Does the librarian have a regular spot in the school newsletter and assembly?
- Are students encouraged, through the newsletter and assemblies, to give lively, tempting book reviews (not just plot summaries)?

... public libraries appear to be less often used by young people in general [and] their role changes as teens get older, with the bright, friendly children's section being replaced by a formal, confusing adult library ... [p 9]

- What contact does your school have with the local library?
- How often do students visit the local library in school time?
- How well known is the children's librarian from your local library? Does s/he pay regular visits to the school, or make announcements in the newsletter or at assemblies?

... many young people feel they do not enjoy the texts prescribed for their English reading ... English teachers need to recognise their increased importance as sources of book advice to secondary school students. [p 9]

- Which staff members (teaching and general) would students identify as book-lovers and regular readers? Do these people have time to interact with students about reading for pleasure?
- How often are students able to have free reading time during class time? Is there a free reading period every week (supervised by an enabling adult)?
- When and where do students see staff members reading for pleasure, and talking about it?

The ACYL will initially respond to the 'Young Australians Reading' research report by ... working towards the establishment of an 'Australian Youth Literature Web Site' ... [p 10]

- What would the children, parents and staff members at your school contribute to this website if it were up and running?
- What would you like from this website?
- What pilot family reading programs could be set up in your local community/bookshop?

Together with their peak bodies and administrations, [teachers, publishers, school and public librarians and booksellers] could make public and secondary school libraries and bookshops more relevant and appealing ... [p11]

- What can be done to make the library a more appealing place to be for pleasure? (If it's already a great place, try to identify and document why.)
- Pool your knowledge of all the literacy organisations you know of. What do they offer? What could they offer?

The Hall and Room Test

In this exercise, participants were asked to imagine that they are walking down a hallway and come to a door. They open the door and behind the door see a room full of people who love to read. They were asked to describe the room, the people and the activities.

This exercise was then repeated with a room full of people who hate to read, and the participants were finally asked which room they would prefer to be in. [p 17]

Findings of the Qualitative Hall and Room Test

	Love reading	Hate reading
Room type	Library or reading room, lots of books, chairs.	Not always a room, but an oval or field.
Activity	Reading or talking to each other about books.	Playing sport, BBQ, just socialising. Shouting, drinking, ripping or burning books.
Type of people	Intelligent, friendly, fun. Wear glasses, Asians, a little bit nerdy.	Friendly, sporty, popular. Flanelette shirts (Westie), not intelligent, drink, shout, violent.
Which room you would prefer?	**Readers** Definitely choose reading room — 'people like me'.	**Non-readers** Lots of trouble choosing — do not belong in reading room, but reading-haters too negative. Felt would try a bit of both.

- Conduct this test at a staff meeting.
- Discuss the results.
- Are there any implications for teaching and timetabling in your school?

Attitudinal segments (see page 3 of this PEN)

- Ask colleagues and friends to identify the attitudinal segment they feel most at home with.
- Are these people happy where they are? If not, what can be done (what support and mentoring can be provided) to facilitate change?
- Consider the students in your class: how do they fall into the attitudinal segments?
- Is there a correlation between the segment you fall into and where your students are?

Reading behaviour

... the leisure activity carried out most often by young people is watching television ... The next most popular activity is hanging out with friends ...

As for reading for pleasure, ... one in two claim to do so at least every few days. At the other end of the spectrum, two in ten say that they read for pleasure about once a month or less often.

Magazines are mentioned ahead of other types of material by two-thirds of 10–18s, but particularly higher amongst secondary school students.

- Ask staff to predict which magazines will be the most popular among students in the school, giving reasons.
- Survey your class to identify reading preferences, and collate the results.
- Are there any implications for the school?
- Publish the survey findings in the school newsletter. Ask for reactions from students and the wider school community.
- What can your school do to validate the reading interests of its students?

Where to from here? Strategies for action SARAH MAYOR COX

We know that it isn't best teaching practice to teach to one 'level' of capability, as if the whole class could be redefined as one ideal student. So why, when we 'do' reading for pleasure, would we adopt a one-size-fits-all approach? Surely if we have four different profiles of readers in our class (see the attitudinal segments on page 3), we could employ at least four different ways of engaging our students. So in what different ways can we work with these different groups?

Give students their say

I am a great believer in talking to learn. Talk underpins "breakthroughs to literacy" (Tunstall, 1989). But where are the opportunities to talk about reading for pleasure in school?

- Copy selected quotes from *Young Australians Reading* onto task cards. Use these as discussion starters for small student groups:
  - 'Young people claim that they read for pleasure no less frequently than they play computer games or use the Internet.' (p 1)
  - 'Reading drops off as young people progress through school.' (p 1)
  - 'Books, reading and ideas [are] important to the educational, social and intellectual wellbeing of young people.' (p 1)

  - 'When children move to secondary school, very few parents continue to read to them.' (p 6)
- Bring the class back together to discuss conclusions or trends emerging from these discussions.
- Talk through the descriptions of each attitudinal segment. Reinforce the idea that no segment is 'better' than another. Ask students to locate themselves in one of the segments. Why do they put themselves there? Are they happy there?
- Divide the class into attitudinal segments. Does each group feel that the description accurately portrays their attitudes and reading practices? What could teachers, or the school, do to cater better for this group's reading attitudes, preferences and practices (e.g. which books would students study if they had the choice; what activities would they prefer to do?)?
- Scribe the students' responses. Circulate them in a newsletter or ask students to address a staff meeting. Try to implement some of their suggestions.

Keep leisure reading relevant and acceptable

- Ask students to list and analyse the ways in which products, activities, ways of thinking and lifestyles are marketed.
- Did the students identify 'reading for pleasure'? Ask: what is being done to market reading for pleasure? What could be done? Collate students' responses and send a class letter to organisations such as the Australian Centre for Youth Literature, publishing groups, and journals such as *Viewpoint*, *Good Reading*, *Australian Book Review* and *Practically Primary*.

Make 'school reading' interesting

- Ask students, particularly those in the middle years, to survey their peers to find out their attitudes to the reading that is done in school.
- Do students find the *reading* boring, or do they find the *activities* associated with the reading boring? What activity would they rather do?
- Trial reading for pleasure with no associated activity (informal sharing at most). Does this change the way that students feel about reading?

Foster a culture of home reading

Try to create a pleasurable environment for parents and the wider school community — many people do not have good experiences of reading for pleasure.

- Hold regular borrowing nights at the school or local library (provide child care and refreshments if possible).
- Organise a parent reading group (provide child care and refreshments if possible).
- When you organise author/illustrator visits, allocate some time for the visitor to speak with parents (provide child care and refreshments if possible; also check with the Children's Book Council of Australia to determine whether you might be able to gain access to funds to support an author/illustrator visit).
- Organise bus tours to take parents and wider community members to good bookshops.

Change the ways in which books are selected and represented

Perhaps the most important things your primary school can do are:

- work closely with neighbouring secondary schools, mentoring and exchanging teachers and ideas so that reading for pleasure is validated and the delivery of literacy subjects becomes more flexible
- connect with the industry (book publishers, booksellers, universities, literary organisations, local authors and illustrators, journals and reports) — there are many fabulous initiatives going on in schools and communities
- make public all the fabulous initiatives going on in your school and community (the editor of *Practically Primary* would love to hear from you (ph. 1800 248 379), so would the authors of this *PEN*)
- teach story-telling skills to peer mediators, or interested children; set up story-telling activity areas during break times
- celebrate (loudly!) all the good things that your school/community is doing to foster and support reading for pleasure, and continually consider what more could be done
- cancel a staff or unit meeting and instead ask teachers to bring whatever they're reading at present for 20–30 minutes of sustained silent reading. Discuss the effect of this, and reflect on the value of sustained silent reading for your students.

You might even:

- create a wish list of prominent people whom you would like to come to your school to discuss what they are reading
- instead of music, play an audio tape for five minutes during one recess or lunch break. Observe students' reactions.

If you want young people to be literate ...

- Develop as a book professional.
- Make and protect time for reading. Someone determines priorities. Aidan Chambers (1991) has said that the quality of a school can be judged by its determination to create and protect time to read. He believes that this time to read (and 15 minutes is not enough) needs to be available at least until the age of 15.
- Recognise the critical connection between reading well, writing well and general educational success.
- Provide adequate resources and staff to inform and enthuse other staff, families and students.
- Work closely with your colleagues, including booksellers and public librarians, to provide a wide, up-to-date, attractively displayed, accessible selection of reading material that includes non-fiction texts and magazines.
- Ensure that students have some control and choice about what they read.
- Encourage students to talk, share and recommend books; limit and vary writing tasks.
- Invite guest authors, run literary events and take students to literary events.
- Recognise and promote information technology as fulfilling different purposes from reading fiction and for pleasure. The two are complementary but different.
- Order Aidan Chambers' *The Reading Environment* (1991) from PETA.

– Agnes Nieuwenhuizen

About the authors

Agnes Nieuwenhuizen is Manager of the Australian Centre for Youth Literature at the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne. She writes and speaks widely in the field of children's and young adults' literature and is the author of two book guides: *Good Books for Teenagers* (1992) and *More Good Books for Teenagers* (1995). She has also edited two collections of short stories and commissioned and edited the significant collection of essays *The Written World: Youth and Literature* (1994). She was awarded the Dromkeen Medal for services to children's and young adult literature in 1994.

Sarah Mayor Cox is a lecturer in English Education at La Trobe University, Bendigo. She has worked as a primary-school teacher and teacher librarian. She is also a sometime book reviewer, a delegate to the Victorian executive of the Children's Book Council of Australia and a former president of the Central Victorian local council of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association.

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